

One Plus One by Luddleston

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Summary:

His kid's first day of kindergarten would have been stressful enough if Keith *didn't* vividly remember the elementary-school art teacher asking him for his number in a bar.

But that's *definitely* the same Lance, and Keith has found himself living an actual nightmare.

One Plus One

Author's Note:

I started drawing Keith with a tiny adorable child a couple weeks ago, sooooo obviously I had to extensively write about it.

My general idea was that Keith has a sister he's estranged from who had a kid, but wasn't allowed custody of him because her life is extremely a mess. Since Keith is her only living relative, he was able to adopt the nugget and so now he's a dad. I kept it kinda vague in the story so you can imagine what you will :)

idk, I just thought dad Keith would be cute.

June

Keith didn't go to bars a lot anymore. In the past five years, he'd only gone to the yearly office Christmas party at Redding's, and he didn't even bother with last year's, because sometimes, when you work from home, you have the blessing of nobody remembering to invite you to perfunctory work events you don't want to go to.

But Matt and Pidge invited him, and when the Holts say jump, Keith says fine, if I have to. That's how he ended up at a little bar downtown, trying way too many drinks because Matt kept saying, "this one's soooo good, you *have* to." And Matt wouldn't be reminded that the only thing Keith *had* to do was hang out with them and not go home at nine-thirty like last time, because he didn't want Pidge to call him an old man again. He wasn't even thirty yet.

"You have a babysitter for once in your life, Keith," they kept saying, along with, "live a little," and other things people told Keith.

He turned his half-finished drink in his hands, looking at the stained glass behind the bar. It was a cool little place, built in the gutted shell of a church

and still bearing the original name, St. Sebastian. Keith was all for corrupting religious iconography.

And the cocktails were alright, too.

He'd had enough drinks that he didn't startle when somebody sat down noisily on the barstool next to his. "Somebody" was a man about his age, giving him a sideways look and a crooked smile. "Hey," he said, "I'd offer to buy you a drink, but you seem to have one already."

Keith pushed his hair out of his face because he really needed a better look at the situation. No, he thought, squinting at the man next to him, he didn't know him from somewhere. Maybe this guy knew Matt and Pidge. Keith could have figured that out if he just said something along the lines of, who are you, why are you talking to me, or do you know those weirdos in the glasses, but instead he just said, "*what?*" because drunk Keith liked monosyllables.

"Oh, sorry, should I have gone with *come here often?*" he asked, his smile reaching his eyes, carving the beginning of crow's feet into the corners. "That one just seems so cliche, though. How about, hey gorgeous, I forgot my phone number, could you give me yours?" He leaned a few inches closer, planting an elbow on the bar, resting his chin on a curled fist, watching Keith like he'd poked a sleeping cat and he was waiting for a reaction.

"Are you hitting on me?" Keith asked, lifting his drink and breaking their eye contact to tip his head back and take another swallow.

"Ding ding ding, now he gets it. Yes, I'm hitting on you. Of course I'm hitting on you, have you seen you? Name's Lance. And yours?"

God, he was talking too fast for drunk Keith to process. He took another sip of the whisky like it was going to help. After this one, he was switching to something that wouldn't ratchet his BAC up so high. "Why?" Eloquent. He knew he'd regret the awkward social interaction later, but he wouldn't remember how pretty Lance was by that point.

"Because you're really fucking hot, and I'm trying to pick you up," Lance said, using that tone Keith had when he was explaining something to his kid and trying not to sound condescending.

"Well, stop."

"Christ. Sorry. Kill a guy for asking," Lance said, and flagged the bartender down for a refill of whatever he was having. It was something with lemons in it. And leaves? Why the hell would anyone want to drink something with leaves in it. "It's cool, man," he said, even though Keith had given him no indication that it was cool. "I get turned down by straight guys all the time. No sweat."

"I'm not straight," Keith corrected him, suddenly affronted that Lance had assumed that the only reason Keith wouldn't be interested in him was because of his sexuality and not because he was completely obnoxious. "I'm just not interested. In going home with anybody. Except myself."

"Oh. Somebody back there waiting on you?" Lance asked, and it sounded so innocent, except Keith knew he was just trying to ask if he was single.

"Yes," Keith said. His five-year-old, but he wasn't telling Lance that. "My five-year-old." Oh, so he was telling Lance that. Would've been nice if his brain had warned him that one was slipping through the filter.

Most of the time, if someone was hitting on him at a bar, the "I have a kid" line would've made them back off real quick. That happened plenty of the time with guys he *wanted* to date; they'd get around to the part where Keith mentioned his son, and then it was a quiet *oh* and then a whole lot of awkward conversation leading up to either "I guess I'll see you later," and no texts back, or "I'm sorry, but I'm really not ready for that yet." Add in a whole lot of unspoken questions about who the mom was, and there was Keith's love life.

Lance was clearly not most people. He leaned forward, completely dropping the suave persona, and said, "wait, you have a kid?" like he was asking somebody if he could pet their four-week-old pomeranian puppy. "Show me pictures!"

Keith was baffled, but he flipped his phone over and thumbed the unlock button, holding out his lockscreen for Lance to look at the picture on it—the two of them from last Christmas, both smiling the same close-mouthed smile at the camera. Lance melted into a goofy, no less crooked smile. "That's, uh, that's us." Well, duh.

"He's cute," Lance said. "He looks like you."

"People say that a lot," Keith said. Oliver was biologically Keith's nephew, but they favored each other enough that he looked like he could've been Keith's clone. Oliver would never get those weird *oh, you must be the adopted one* remarks Keith always got with the Holts.

Lance kept going. "My sister has twins, a boy and a girl, they're three. I love them. I always get along with kids better than adults, you know? I'm a teacher, so that's not weird." He kept going, saying something about how his best friend was a teacher, too, but Keith wasn't paying attention, he was gesturing at Matt over Lance's shoulder. One of those point-at-the-door-and-shrug numbers. "Oh, right," Lance said, eventually, "you have to go."

"Yeah," Keith said, when Matt finally interpreted his hand signals and wrangled Pidge away from the pool table, where they were probably facilitating some illegal bets.

"Well. See you around," Lance said, without even giving him a parting flirty line. He clapped Keith on the shoulder and walked back to a booth where a couple of other people were sitting, waiting for him to return.

He watched Lance's back disappear for too long, stared with his mouth open until he realized he was staring with his mouth open and shut it with a click of his teeth. He waved the bartender over so he could pay his tab and did not look back at Lance once. Correction: he did not look back at Lance twice.

Keith stepped out into the summer air, leaned against the brick wall of the bar, and took a breath. It was humid enough that he felt like he was breathing underwater, and he pushed his bangs back off his head before they started to get sweaty. For the first time in what must've been over six

years, he sort of wanted a cigarette. Matt and Pidge followed him out a few seconds later, and that desire faded out into the air like it was melting in the summer haze.

August

For the remaining month and a half of the summer, Keith didn't think about Lance. He spent most of his time at the local kiddie pool or the park, worrying about whether the bigger kids were picking on his son, too busy to think about some weird guy he met at a bar. Especially not when they were walking down the aisles in Target alongside a bunch of moms with carts full of two-for-one Crayola sets, Keith explaining to Oliver that, yes, he did *have* to go to kindergarten, but it was going to be fun and he was going to make friends.

Right now, Oliver had two friends: a neighborhood boy named Ryan who was only sometimes at the house on the corner because he spent half his time at his dad's house, and a neighborhood cat he'd named Red, who absolutely hated Keith but wanted nothing more than to curl up at the top of the slide while Oliver debated whether or not he was going to go down it or keep petting behind the cat's giant bat-ears. At the beginning of this summer, when Keith realized that, shit, his son only had two friends and one was a cat, he thought maybe he should've sent Oliver to preschool.

Well, if you asked him, Oliver would say that Pidge was his best friend, but Keith maintained that you could not have a best friend who was five times your age and also related to you.

At least he seemed excited about his Spider-Man backpack.

At the parent-teacher meeting the week before Oliver's first day of kindergarten, Keith suddenly had drag up memories from two months ago, so he could determine whether that guy sitting with the rest of the teachers was the same dude who had hit on him that one time.

There were eight people at the long table at the front of the school cafeteria-slash-gym, and the parents were scattered around other tables, most of them turned to face the front. Some of them looked like they'd already been

through the same meeting the previous year, a few of them like they'd gone through this multiple times. But most of them, like Keith, were sitting forward in nervous anticipation, trying to memorize everything the principal and vice-principal said about first-day procedures.

Keith was pretty sure nobody else in the room was trying to figure out if the young guy on the end of the row of teachers had once asked him for his number in a hipster bar.

The principal went about introducing the teachers, first the three to her left, Mr. Garrett—Oliver's teacher—and two others whose names Keith did not remember, because he didn't need to. The last three were the music teacher, the gym teacher, and the art teacher, Lance McClain. Definitely the same Lance McClain who called him gorgeous on a Friday night.

Keith vaguely remembered Lance telling him he taught... somewhere. He hadn't mentioned where. Shit. Keith just wanted the first day of school thing to be normal, and not to give him extreme anxiety. Looks like that was too much to ask.

It might've gone fine, if Lance behaved like a normal adult human being and didn't approach him or act like they had ever met before. Instead, Lance wandered up to him and looked at him like he was going to ask Keith something stupid.

"Hey, have we met before?"

And there was the stupid.

Keith could've taken the mature option and said, yes, we have, it was at a bar and I would prefer that we don't talk about it, especially since you will be supervising my child for an hour once every three class days. Instead, he said, "no, I don't think we have."

Lance frowned and curled one finger over his chin, leaning in like he was John Watson and Keith was a particularly confusing puzzle Holmes had set him on. "I swear I've seen you before."

"Guess I just have one of those faces." He did not have one of those faces.

"That can't be it," Lance said, "I feel like I'd recognize your hair, or something."

Keith didn't run his fingers through his bangs or fiddle with his ponytail, but it was a very near thing. "No, I don't think I know you," he lied. He remembered Lance with a dazzling smile, the way his face looked over the rim of a tumbler.

Lance just shrugged. "Eh, whatever, I'll think of it. Lance McClain," he said, holding out his hand for Keith to shake.

Keith could not shake his hand, because his right arm was full of parent info for the first day of school, so he just kind of gestured with the folder and the student handbook and the notebook *he* had brought with him just in case. "I'm Keith. Kogane," he offered, and there was that brilliant smile again. Keith squinted, and he wasn't sure if it was because his contacts were itching or because Lance was literally blinding him—no, that wasn't possible. Must've been his contacts.

Lance had dimples. Keith was hopeless.

"Nice to meet you, Keith," Lance said, and then, with the conversation neatly ended and tied up with a bow, he was swept away by another set of parents who wanted to talk to him about their child being allergic to tempera paint or something like that.

Keith left the school after a short conversation with Oliver's teacher, and the way the double doors banged shut behind him had an air of finality, like Keith's fate had been sealed.

He had a thing for one of his kid's schoolteachers. He was doomed.

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Oliver was quiet on the ride to school. It was only a five-minute drive, but Keith kept looking in the rearview at every single stop sign. Oliver stared

blankly out the window the whole way, and he didn't point out a single dog at any of the houses they passed. Keith worried.

"Doing alright, buddy?" Keith asked, and Oliver just shrugged and sighed in a way reminiscent of, well, Keith.

"Do I really have to go?" Oliver asked, and dear god, Keith thought they had this conversation last night. And a couple weeks ago in Target.

"You're gonna be alright," Keith said, which wasn't a yes, except that it was. Part of him wanted to turn the car around, head right back home, and tell Oliver he didn't have to, that Keith would homeschool him or something. But Keith was ill-equipped to homeschool anybody, and he had a full-time job that did not have "educating a child" on the schedule. Also, Keith was already pretty sure he was messing up his kid ninety percent of the time and he didn't want to up that percentage by messing up his education, too.

He was so busy worrying about exactly how much counseling his kid was gonna need later on in life, he nearly missed the turn into the school parking lot and braked a little too fast. Not fast enough that the seatbelts locked, so Keith was still shy of the "should not be driving with a child in the backseat" level of terrible. He clicked on the turn signal and took a breath as he pulled into the parking lot, eschewing the line of parents pulling up to the curved sidewalk out front of the school and parking in an open space in between two identical SUVs.

"You ready?" he asked, turning around in his seat. They'd gotten there a little bit early, so that there wouldn't be a ton of kids in the classroom when the two of them walked in, and in case it took them a while to actually make it to the classroom.

Oliver didn't answer him, so it seemed like they were in for the latter.

"C'mon, bud," Keith said. "I promise, I'll be here to pick you up by lunchtime."

"Will you make me chicken nuggets?" Oliver asked, pouting, his head tipped down so Keith couldn't see his eyes, just a mess of curly black hair.

God, he couldn't believe he was going to bribe his kid into going to school with chicken nuggets. "Yeah, I will," he said. "You're going to have fun today, I swear. Mr. Garrett seems like a really nice teacher, and I think he has some cool stuff planned for you guys today." He wished he remembered anything about his first day of kindergarten, so he had something reassuring to say, but he'd repressed just about everything before age fourteen.

Either the reassuring words or the nugget promises must've worked, because Oliver unbuckled his seatbelt and let Keith open the car door for him. Oliver refused to hold his hand on the way in, but he did grab the hem of Keith's jacket, and even that made his throat feel tight and his eyes feel hot.

Keith was not going to be that dad who cried on his kid's first day of kindergarten.

When he walked out of the school, the door shutting behind him again sounded like the gates of hell. He felt nearly as drained as if he'd run a marathon, and he wasn't sure if it was because he had put so much effort into being excited about a kindergarten classroom or because the intense anxiety that something was going to happen to his kid just kept building. Ugh. Somebody should've told him that being a parent was fucking exhausting. Oh, wait.

Keith slammed the car door a little too hard. He dropped into the driver's seat heavily and gripped the steering wheel, dropping his head against his knuckles. He didn't even turn the car on. He just took a shuddering breath, blinked way too many times, and held on so tight his knuckles turned white.

Yep. He was that dad who cried on his kid's first day of kindergarten.

During the summer, Keith had imagined he was going to get a ton of work done every day while Oliver was at school. Now, maybe when a couple days had come and gone and he wasn't pacing around the kitchen anxiously for a full hour, that might be plausible, but today, he was busy wearing a hole in the hardwood.

He called Colleen, who told him that it was normal; she'd been just as nervous on Matt and Pidge's first days of kindergarten (and Keiths' first day of high school). He'd been less surprised about that less one, because his anxiety had been contagious. It all felt more rational when Colleen said it. Then again, she wasn't the one who'd graduated from pacing to walking in circles around the living room.

She talked to him for a good hour about the vacation she was already planning for the upcoming summer, the conference Sam was going to in January, and whether Matt was finally going to propose to his boyfriend. Keith was pretty sure Matt had been dating Shiro since high school, and considering they were both in their thirties, he agreed with Colleen that one of them should have gotten around to it by now. He also knew Shiro well enough to know they weren't secretly married, so that was one fantasy out the window.

He also accepted the invite to Myrtle Beach without hesitation, and only remembered how much he hated beach tourists after he hung up.

By the time the conversation ended, he was two hours of a four-hour school day down, and he'd only spent one of them pacing. The other, pacing while talking on the phone. Pretty good, so far. Keith spent another hour going for a run and showering off after, and the last alternating between trying to get work done and more pacing. Then, he finally got back in the car and waited in the nearly-empty parking lot for about twenty minutes because he'd gotten there way too early.

When he retrieved a bouncing, cheerful five-year-old at the end of the day, he was starting to regret how much pacing his schedule included. School was great, Oliver decided, especially art class, did you know Mr. McClain has a *robot* in the art room? *A robot, dad.*

As Oliver happily listed off all his new best friends over a plate of bribery nuggets, Keith realized two things: one, he was never going to remember all these names. And two, maybe he was doing alright at this. He was going to have to pull out that "WORLD'S OKAYEST DAD" mug Pidge got him last Christmas.

September

Friday afternoon, Oliver came home with a permission slip for his very first school field trip. The kindergarteners and first graders were going to the local art museum for a half-day to visit a modern sculpture exhibit that was, according to the short description he'd been given, extremely colorful. It was entirely written in Comic Sans.

In addition to the permission slip, there was a half-sheet of paper requesting that parents sign up to chaperone. Keith immediately set that one on top of the pile of boxes in the recycle bin he hadn't emptied yet. Yeah, no. Keith couldn't handle a whole day of telling five-year-olds not to touch that. He already took Oliver to the grocery store every other week.

The following Friday, Oliver's take-home folder contained another brightly colored half-sheet of paper with a slightly more impassioned plea for parents to sign up to chaperone the trip. Still in Comic Sans.

By now, Keith knew he was free that day, and it inspired enough guilt in him that he filled out his contact information and handed it to Oliver's teacher in person the next day, because he couldn't trust Oliver to remember to do it himself.

Mr. Garrett—*call me Hunk*, he'd said, and Keith still wasn't sure if that was his actual name—was possibly the nicest person ever, and he lit up when Keith handed over the form offering his services as a glorified babysitter for the day.

"Thanks, Keith!" he said, because he somehow remembered Keith's name along with thirty kindergarteners', "we've really been needing people, and most of the PTA moms—excuse me, PTA members—can't come, so that really puts us out."

A couple weeks ago, Robin, who was... Kaylee? Katelynn? Carli? ...somebody's mom, had asked him to join the PTA. They'd needed more diversity, she said, because they didn't have any dads, and Keith had declined, mostly because Robin and her friends spent a lot more time talking about how hot the art teacher was than anything else.

Not that Keith didn't have thoughts on that.

"It's no problem," Keith said, even though he was dreading it. He'd already stuck a bottle of extra-strength Excedrin in his glove box for the impending headache.

"Well, we really appreciate it," Hunk said, giving him a smile so brilliant, Keith actually stopped feeling stressed about it for a solid five seconds.

The stress returned tenfold when he parked outside of the art museum and opened the back door for Oliver, who scampered over to join the rest of the students trailing out of the school bus. It wasn't the prospect of keeping track of forty-three students that had him on edge, it was the sight of Lance, following the last kid out of the school bus.

He stopped in his tracks in the middle of the parking lot, and almost got hit by a minivan.

Of course Lance was here. He was the art teacher. This was a trip to the art museum. Keith was also pretty sure they needed as many teachers as possible for this thing.

Maybe Lance wouldn't notice him. No, that was ridiculous. He could count the number of people over four feet tall on one hand. Shit. He couldn't hide. Why had he agreed to this?

"Hey, Keith!" Lance called, because *of course* he noticed him right away.
"Get over here!"

Keith got over there, but he stayed on the other side of the group, as far away from Lance as he could be. Oliver immediately bounced over to him and stood up against his side, wasting no time telling all his classmates that his dad was here because he was *cool*. Everybody under the age of eight seemed to agree after Oliver told them Keith had a motorcycle, and that he'd agreed to drive Oliver to school on it for his birthday. He got a dirty look from one of the other parent chaperones for that. Jesus, lady. It was a five-minute drive on residential streets.

They entered the museum through wide glass doors, stepping into a foyer that was tiled with a rainbow mosaic. A series of what looked like enormous paper cranes hung from the vaulted ceiling, the lowest of which was just out of arm's reach. A tour guide waited for them at a circular counter with multicolored lights matching the floor, and she greeted them with the appropriate enthusiasm needed for a huge gaggle of elementary-schoolers.

After a short introduction, the tour guide turned it over to Lance, who had clearly done this before. He got all the kids arranged in a big circle around him, and then listed off the rules: they weren't allowed to touch anything without asking first, they had to be quiet when the guide was talking, and if they had questions, they wait until they reached end of each area, and raise their hands to ask them. Then, he asked all of them to give him a thumbs-up if they understood, and he turned in a circle on his heel to make sure he'd gotten one from all of them.

Parents, according to Lance, were not exempt to these rules. Keith rolled his eyes and did his best to make a thumbs-up sarcastic.

Keith did not think this little rigmarole was cute.

Absolutely not.

The museum guide led them through the sculpture exhibit, describing giant, multi-colored abstract pieces, all of which looked perfect for kid-touching, as she went. The class did better than Keith expected, though, and he only had to give stern looks to a couple of shady-looking ones who got their hands a little too close to the artwork.

He missed most of what the tour guide said, but Oliver filled him in every few minutes. "This one's made of old train parts, dad," he said, and then, "that one took two whole years to make!"

"That's like almost half your life," Keith said, and Oliver quietly added *whoa*, even though he didn't have a very good concept of halves yet.

At the end of the tour, they were led into a room full of stations that each had different materials for the kids to build their own tiny sculptures. It was just construction paper, marshmallows on toothpicks, and stuff like that, but it seemed to fulfil their desire to touch something.

Keith watched Oliver make a giant, perfectly even sphere of green play-dough, and set it on top of a block. He wasn't sure what it was supposed to be. How old did you have to be to figure out how to make abstract art?

While he was deep in thought, Lance walked over and bumped his shoulder against Keith's. He nearly jumped out of his skin, and he couldn't stop himself from flinching away. Lance didn't seem to care, he just leaned back against the wall next to Keith, still close enough that their shoulders bumped together if either of them so much as moved.

"Hey, thanks for stepping up and doing this thing," he said. "You were a real help. Also, half the kids are afraid-of-slash-amazed-by you, I think, so I'm pretty sure all you have to do is look at them and they'll quit being bad."

"Why are they afraid of me?" he asked, sounding pretty horrified, himself. Did he scare kids? Was he that one dad that everyone thought was a little bit weird? Did Oliver tell the class about that time Keith got arrested? Because that one wasn't his fault.

"Probably because of that look on your face right now," Lance said, with another of his crooked smiles.

"What? No." He had a perfectly good suddenly-coming-to-a-realization expression. "I'm not—I just have resting... you know. I just always look mad." Bitchface. He had resting bitchface. But no matter how quiet he said that, either a kindergartener or a parent would hear him. He wasn't sure what would be worse. Lance seemed to catch his drift, though, because he made a sound like he was agreeing that Keith had resting bitchface.

"It's probably just because you have a ponytail and you're always wearing a leather jacket. Also, you're apparently Ghost Rider," he said.

Keith just rolled his eyes again. "I just have a motorcycle. It's not even a big one."

Lance snorted a laugh out through his nose and clapped Keith on the shoulder. "Whatever you say, dude," he said, still laughing, and Keith tried to figure out when he'd made a joke. "Whatever you say."

Just about then, a child started screaming, because it was impossible to get through an elementary-school field trip without incident. Lance sighed, "oh, no," and left for the source of the screaming, which was a little girl with pigtail braids, her face scrunched up and red, tears welling up in her eyes. Keith took a step forward, but wasn't sure where to go from there, because the goal had been to get away from Lance, but now another girl was yelling something about, "she took my crayons!" while the first one shouted back, "I had them first!"

Was he supposed to help with this kind of thing? Was that what chaperones were here for? Keith felt very unequipped for this.

Lance knelt down between the girls, and he probably had everything handled, so Keith didn't advance further. He watched as Lance asked both of them in turn if they were willing to calm down and listen to his solution, which was, brilliantly, to find another crayon that was the exact same color. Keith was suddenly glad he'd ended up with a kid who was pretty rational, because it didn't seem to be common for his age group.

It hit him then, as he watched Lance ask both of the girls to apologize to each other and then give them a high-five when they did, that he might be interested in Lance for more than just his looks. As soon as Lance stood, another student ran up to him, showing him a creation of mostly popsicle sticks that was an unidentifiable four-legged animal. Lance complimented her genuinely on the construction of her... thing, and somehow he knew right away that it was a dog.

Keith realized he had to stop staring at Lance, even if watching him with his students was kind of cute.

"Dad, look what I built!"

Oh, thank god, a reason to stop staring at Lance.

Turns out, the green circle thing was a space alien.

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Keith realized, for what must've been the sixth time by now, that it was way too exhausting to have people over. But they were in the middle of the last warm stretch they were gonna get before autumn set in, and Matt decided that they should grill, even though he definitely did not have a grill in his apartment. So he'd nominated Keith's place, because they'd been at his parents' place the last time and it was only fair. Keith thought maybe Matt should just not plan a barbecue if he didn't have a grill.

It was no big deal, Matt had told him, it's just a few people. We'll bring all the food, he said, and Shiro's gonna cook, so it's fine. Keith had been reassured that he wouldn't have to do anything.

That was before Matt forgot to bring hamburger buns and Keith's evening went from, "you don't have to do anything" to, "hey, would you go to the grocery store real quick?"

So he drove the five minutes down the road to the nearest grocery store, enjoying the few moments of silence he had. God, he just wanted to go to bed. At least he wasn't getting dragged into another round of Pictionary. He was pretty bad at it already, and playing with a five-year-old on one of the teams didn't make it any easier, even if Oliver was a better artist than any of them.

He peacefully ignored everybody else in the grocery store, planning the fastest route from the bread aisle to the cash registers, hoping he could time it so he didn't have to wait for a self-checkout machine to open. He was going to escape without any social interaction, which was his favorite way to make any situation work.

Then he ran into Lance.

Keith noticed him right away, standing near the end of the aisle with a cart full of... peppers? Who needed that many peppers? He was dressed more casually than Keith had ever seen him, just wearing a hoodie and a pair of basketball shorts, a backwards baseball hat making the front of his hair stick up. It wasn't a good look. Not cute at all. Okay, maybe the hair thing was a little cute.

Keith planned to sneak in there without saying anything, grab some hamburger buns, and get out before Lance even knew Keith had been within a mile of him. It was a great plan, and would have worked, except that Lance said, "hey, Keith!" and trotted down the aisle to greet him.

"Hey," he said. He didn't even bother with the *oh, hey, didn't see you there* thing.

"What's up, man?" Lance asked. He scratched at his chin and Keith noticed he had some stubble. He stopped looking at Lance then.

"Not much," Keith pulled the first bag of rolls that looked about right off the shelf. "Just grabbing some stuff for dinner that my brother forgot."

"Oh, cool, family dinner?"

"I guess," Keith said, even though it was mostly Matt using him for his house.

"Well, what're the odds I'd run into you here! Crazy, right?"

"Yeah, pretty weird," Keith said, backing away from him and glancing in the direction of the registers, hoping Lance would realize he was trying to bow out of the conversation.

Lance gave him a look that would've had a lot of eyebrows if Lance had a lot of eyebrows. "I guess it's like the first time you see a teacher outside of school and then you realize teachers have real lives and don't sleep in their classrooms."

"I know you have a real life, Lance, believe me," Keith mumbled.

"Ha!" Lance cheered, pointing an accusing finger at him, and Keith realized saying that had been a mistake. "I knew you remembered the bar thing!" Lance was still yelling. There was a middle-aged woman choosing a loaf of sourdough a few feet away, and she was starting to give them weird looks.

"I don't—no. There was no *thing*—"

"There was totally a thing and you know it," Lance said. "I met you at St. Sebastian's this summer, and you've been pretending like you forgot. I'm offended, Keith," he didn't sound offended, "*we bonded*." Lance put a hand over his heart with fake drama and swooned into him, and the weird looks intensified.

"Of course I acted like I forgot," Keith hissed through his teeth, nudging Lance away from him, and the woman rolled her squeaky cart down the aisle, leaving them in far too much privacy. "I—that's what you *do*, Lance, I'm not gonna admit that I remembered you hitting on me, you're—you're *my kid's teacher, for god's sake*."

"I *barely* hit on you," Lance said. "We talked about my sister's kids and Oliver like the whole time."

It was a little more than barely.

"Lance, can we just—" Pretend this never happened? Act like adults about it? *Actually* forget? He couldn't bring himself to say any of it.

"Dude, it's cool," Lance said, "I hit on you, you turned me down, that's all. We're fine."

"Oh. Okay."

He regretted something, but he wasn't sure if it was turning Lance down or tolerating him in the first place.

"Yeah, see you around?"

"See you."

Keith supposed the way he watched Lance's back retreat down the aisle instead of just turning and heading right for the register should have surprised him.

October

"You *have* to come with me," Pidge begged.

They were in Keith's kitchen, because Pidge had come over without warning and started making a sandwich before Keith even noticed anybody had walked through his front door. He'd taken his headphones off and paused work to grab a third cup of coffee when he walked into the kitchen and found Pidge stretching up to reach the peanut butter he kept in a cabinet that was just a little bit too high for their little gremlin fingers.

He might've been startled, if this was the first time it'd happened.

"I don't have to do that," he said, pouring his coffee, drinking half the mug in five seconds, and re-filling it, because he needed much more than what was left in the pot to deal with Pidge trying to invite Keith to be their plus-one at a coworker's dinner party.

"Yes you do, I'm invoking the 'you're my big brother and you have to be nice to me,' clause."

"Didn't know I signed up for that when your mom and dad adopted me," Keith said, reaching over Pidge's head to grab the peanut butter for them. "Also, if that's the only reason, ask Matt."

"Matt's going on a date." The Holt family rules had expanded over the last few years to include "don't interrupt Matt and Shiro on a date" because Sam *swore* Matt had a ring.

"Ugh. Don't you have friends for this?"

"Come on, Keith," Pidge said, "Mom would totally babysit for you."

Keith tried rapidly to think of something Oliver had scheduled that he couldn't cancel, but his mind went blank. Come on, it was the end of

October, there had to be *something* Halloween-related. Nope. Nothing. He sighed. "I don't even know what you *wear* to a dinner party. Who holds dinner parties?"

"I know, right? It's like, did I miss the part where we became real adults?" Pidge, who'd just finished assembling a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and cutting it into triangles, had probably not become a real adult. Keith, who had just finished an entire pot of coffee by himself, had not either.

"Why aren't you just... not going? Isn't that what you do with ninety percent of things people from work invite you to?" he asked.

"I can't. Shay's the nicest person in the universe; I'd feel so bad."

Keith thought it over while Pidge finished the entire sandwich, and then finally answered before they started eating more of his food. "Fine. I'll come with you, but only if you give me a very specific description of what I'm supposed to wear."

"Cool," Pidge said, sticking the messy peanut-butter knife in the sink without rinsing it off. "Bring a bottle of wine. Not something shitty."

"You know I don't know which wine is shitty."

"Fine. I'll bring one from both of us," Pidge agreed, and then finally left Keith to get something done.

When the date of the dinner party rolled around, Keith showed up at Pidge's coworker's house ten minutes early, and suddenly regretted taking his bike. It wouldn't have looked as weird if he sat in his car while he waited for Pidge's obnoxious green Jeep to pull up. He also wouldn't have had to worry about making his helmet-hair presentable.

Pidge showed up just as Keith finished up pulling his hair into a bun, and gave him an appraising once-over. Keith dared Pidge to say something about his outfit, because Pidge was wearing a goddamn *sweater-vest*. At least Keith's sweater had sleeves on it.

"You look good, man," was all he got, along with a pat on his shoulder that had a lot more force behind it than he was expecting.

"Thanks. I was worried about the jeans. Not that fancy."

"Nah, you pull it off. Come on, I know you're trying to stall," Pidge said, heading toward the door. Keith sighed and followed.

The house was a little white ranch with a well-manicured red maple tree in the front yard. Typical suburbia, but it was nice, nicer than Keith's house, which was only a few steps removed from its former fixer-upper status. Better neighborhood, too, and they looked like they actually cared about stuff like landscaping. Pidge's coworker greeted them at the door, and gave Pidge a one-armed hug that was returned stiffly. She was a tall lady, probably over six feet, and she was wearing big earrings and a bigger smile. Keith was starting to believe the "nicest person in the universe" thing.

"Oh my god, it smells amazing in here," Pidge said, and Keith nodded his agreement.

"My husband's the cook, not me," she said. "He's been in the kitchen all afternoon, we just get so excited about hosting this every year. I'm glad you could finally come, Pidge!" Pidge gave her a sheepish smile that let Keith know the real reason he'd been dragged to this—Pidge was guilty about skipping out on past years.

"Her husband's the second-nicest person in the universe," Pidge explained, when Shay left them to greet another guest. Pidge, who must've been here at least once before, led Keith straight to the kitchen, where he ran into (actually ran into) somebody he knew.

"Sorry, sorry! You alright? Oh, hey! Keith!"

It took him a too-long pause in conversation to figure out *why* he was looking at Oliver's kindergarten teacher. When he didn't come up with an answer, he led with, "Hey, Hunk. I, uh, didn't know you'd be here."

"It's my house," Hunk explained, and Keith realized that he must've been Shay's husband. Oh. Yeah, that checked out. "You're here with somebody?"

"Yeah, I'm Pidge's older brother," Keith said.

"Well, good to see you, then!" Hunk clapped him on the shoulder and almost sent him flying. Keith wasn't expecting that amount of force from a guy who regularly hung out with kindergarteners.

Somehow, in the time it took for Keith to explain why he was there and Hunk to head back to check on something in the oven, Pidge had gotten an entire plate of food, and returned halfway through a cheese-and-cracker sandwich. "Keith, some guy over there was asking about you."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, god, you're an adult."

Pidge swallowed, but didn't spare him a scathing look. "Just trying to help you out, man. He's cute. Go talk to him." Pidge pointed in the direction of somebody with their back to them, and Keith hesitated for a second until Pidge poked him in the back. He walked away muttering something about sharp fingers and asshole little siblings.

He immediately regretted doing anything Pidge told him to, because that head of messy brown hair was starting to look scarily familiar, and when he turned around—shit. Yeah. That was Lance.

Keith wondered if he had enough time to run out the front door, hop on his bike, and head back across town.

"Hey, Keith! I thought I saw you over there!"

Nope. He didn't.

"Oh, uh, hi, Lance," Keith said, because he was pretty sure he was incapable of greeting Lance in a normal human way, with full sentences and everything. "How, um, how are you?"

"Doing alright," Lance said, leaning with his back against the counter island, arms folded. He was dressed in a blazer that accentuated the breadth

of his shoulders and the sharp taper to his waist. The shirt he had underneath was just a black V-neck, and it showed off more of his chest than Keith could really handle. In short, he looked kind of amazing. "I didn't know you knew Shay. Small world!"

"My... I'm here with somebody," Keith explained. He didn't think he was doing a very good job of explaining.

"That's cool," Lance said. "Someone special?" He punctuated it with a wink, and Keith was thankful they had the dimmers on the overhead lights, so he didn't look so red in the face.

"No, just my sibling," He explained.

Lance made a soft noise of understanding, and Keith swore there was something hopeful in his expression. "You want a glass of wine? You look like you could use one."

Keith wasn't sure what made him look like he could use one, but he agreed. Lance grabbed another of the red he was drinking and handed it to him. If this were a romantic comedy, their fingers would have brushed. They did not. Keith didn't know what kind of wine it was, but it was alright. A little too sweet for him, but at least that would keep him from drinking it too fast. "Thanks," he said, belatedly.

"Yeah, 'course. How's the little guy?"

Keith knew Lance had seen Oliver yesterday. "He's good. Hanging out at grandma and grandpa's, so he's excited about that."

"Oh yeah?" Lance angled himself in toward Keith, giving him all his attention. Keith wasn't sure if that was a conscious thing, but part of him hoped it was.

"Mm-hm, they have a dog, so their house is basically on the same tier as Disneyland." Keith pulled his phone out of his back pocket, because Colleen had sent him this adorable picture of Oliver hugging their very tolerant golden retriever, his face half-buried in fur.

He handed his phone to Lance, whose mouth tilted into a smile. "Oh my god, that's so cute. He's a great kid, you know," he said, passing the phone back over to Keith. "Really sweet. And pretty mature for his age, he's like, one of the only boys who doesn't think girls have cooties."

"Yeah, he's the best. I got lucky," Keith said.

Lance nudged him with his elbow. "Those kinds of things aren't luck. It's probably because he's got a great dad."

Keith hid his smile in another long drink of wine.

Dinner was just as amazing as Pidge had said it would be, and Keith ended up asking Hunk for recipes for three different things—and that was before dessert. Hunk cheerfully said he'd e-mail them, and Pidge joked that Keith was trying to impress somebody at Thanksgiving. Keith replied that the real challenge presented by Thanksgiving dinner was trying to feed a kid who had a limited palate and was very dubious about what was in stuffing.

The one problem with the dinner party thing was that people kept offering to refill Keith's glass of wine, and Keith was anything but a regular drinker. Maybe when he was in college. But he barely even kept beer in the fridge anymore, because he didn't have any practical experience, but it seemed like hell to be drunk and try to take care of a young child at the same time. So by the time everybody dispersed for a bit before dessert happened, he was pretty tipsy, and leaning toward drunk. Pidge laughed at him for it, because they could drink twice as much as Keith and hardly feel it. Keith maintained his belief that Pidge was some kind of superhuman.

"Keith!" Lance cheered, throwing an arm around Keith's shoulders. God, he was too close. And really warm. Keith put a hand on Lance's back to steady himself. "Hey, what's up?"

"Same thing as five minutes ago," Keith said.

Lance laughed like that was a fantastic joke. Keith didn't know when Lance had decided that Keith had a great sense of humor, but he'd like to inform

him that nobody else in the universe agreed. "Hey, this is taking it back, huh? You know, 'cause when we met, we were. Y'know. Drunk."

"I'm not drunk yet," Keith protested, even though he wasn't sure anymore where that particular line was, and if he had to guess, he'd say he crossed it.

"Then you should finish that glass of wine."

He did, but not because Lance had suggested it. Just because he'd finally found a really good wine. He didn't know what this one was called, either. Someone who knew more about wine than him had described it as "dry," which had never made sense to Keith, because it was a liquid. It was wet.

"Hey, Lance," Keith said, because Lance was still standing very close to him, and he was inhibited enough that he thought it might be a good idea to say something very stupid. "Can we talk? We should talk."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"No, like. I want to *talk*. Just to you."

He was pretty sure the people around them weren't even paying attention to them, but he was big on private conversations and not being within range of eavesdroppers. Also, he had an abstract idea of what the conversation would be, and it was going in an, "I don't think you should keep flirting with me like this," direction, and that didn't need an audience.

"C'mon, then," Lance said, dragging him off down a hall, past the bathroom and into a side room that looked like a little office. It was full of mostly bookshelves and plants. Also, a desk with a lot of papers on it, most of which were marked with brightly colored stickers. So, Hunk's office, then. Lance shut the door behind them, and Keith sank back against the wall, relieved when the noise level immediately dropped.

"So, I just—" Keith started, but the rest of his sentence was lost against Lance's mouth. Oh shit. *Shit*. Lance was kissing him. He had a hand around the back of Keith's neck and the other on his shoulder, and his mouth was firm and warm against Keith's. It was so intentional, like Lance had been

wanting to do it all night. Like he'd been looking at Keith over the dinner table and imagining this moment for hours. His mouth was so warm. Keith couldn't remember the last time something made his head spin like that.

Lance pulled back, and Keith felt like he would've fallen over if he wasn't holding onto Lance's biceps so tight. "Oh," he said, all breath.

"Sorry, was that... uh, was that not what I was supposed to be doing?" Lance asked, taking a step back.

"No," Keith said, abruptly changing his mind on the direction of this conversation, "no. That's exactly what I wanted." A little too honestly. He pulled Lance back down, didn't take the time to be worried about being messy, because it had been *so long* and Lance felt *so good*, and he felt like he needed it more than air.

Lance's hand slipped from his neck to his waist, underneath his jacket, hot through his shirt. Keith put his hands on either side of Lance's face, pulling him closer and tilting his head to what he thought was a good angle. Lance didn't get any less intense the longer they went, surprisingly precise for a drunk person. He sucked Keith's lower lip into his mouth and then let Keith do it back, crowding him closer to the wall. Shit, how long had it been since Keith had made out with somebody?

Too long. Way too long, he decided, as Lance's fingernails scratched through his hair, pulling some of it out of his messy bun. Keith ran his hands down Lance's chest, letting them rest just to the side of the lapels on his jacket. He didn't want to stop. He also wasn't drunk enough for his sense of responsibility to have left him completely.

"Lance," he said, "Lance, we've gotta—somebody's gonna walk in—"

Lance just ducked his head and kissed Keith's neck instead, humming against his skin. Keith couldn't quite determine where his knees went. He was going to go with "turned to jelly."

"We should... God. That feels good."

Lance pulled back and whispered, "yeah?" in his ear. He bent to kiss Keith's neck again, softer this time. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that."

"Yeah?"

"Since last summer. You're so..."

Somebody knocked on the door and both of them jumped. Lance's forehead knocked against Keith's chin and he hissed and grabbed Lance's arms hard enough to wrinkle his blazer. "Hey, Lance!" It was Hunk, from the other side of the door. "You in there, buddy? You alright?"

Keith had no idea whether Lance had locked the door. Or if the door even locked. "Yeah, Hunk, I'm all good," he called, "Be out in a second. I just, uh. I was just chillin'."

"Alright, come out of there, you weirdo. You're gonna miss dessert." A pause, into which Lance didn't respond, and then retreating footsteps.

"We should go," Keith said, barely above a whisper.

"Not yet," Lance said, and he leaned down to kiss Keith again, slow and firm, his hand curling around the back of Keith's neck. "Okay," he said, when he pulled away. It took Keith too long to open his eyes after. "Now I'm good."

Keith shook his head. "Nope. One more."

— — —

The next morning, Keith didn't believe his own memory. He seriously considered texting Pidge to ask if there had been a twenty-minute portion of the evening where he'd just disappeared, or if he maybe just passed out for a bit, but he wasn't that delusional. He'd kissed Lance. A total of way too many times. And he was never gonna be able to look him in the eyes when he dropped Oliver off at school ever again.

Keith successfully avoided Lance for all of four days.

October 31st was a Wednesday, and all of the kindergarten parents were invited to watch their children do a little Halloween parade around the school for all the older kids (and the teachers, who probably cared more about a wobbly line of tiny monsters than their students did).

Oliver was dressed as a firefighter, and it was the cutest thing Keith had ever seen. He'd never been big into Halloween, because their neighborhood was notoriously bad for trick-or-treating, but he was starting to think this was a great excuse to get the world's most adorable pictures of your kid.

The Halloween party went about as well as stuffing a bunch of kindergarteners full of candy and pumpkin-shaped cupcakes and then giving them craft supplies could have, and by the end of it, Keith was in possession of a small foam jack o'lantern with very uneven eyes. Oliver had also gotten tired of it halfway through labeling it with his name, so the back of it just read "OLIVE". Keith was gonna put this thing on the fridge for forever.

Oliver had also painted a pumpkin, but they couldn't take it home with them until it dried, because Keith didn't want the backseat of the car painted pink and green.

Things went fine until the parade started, and somebody was crying. Of course somebody was crying, there were a few dozen kindergarteners crowded together in the gym with a bunch of other elementary-schoolers watching them. It wouldn't have bothered Keith—everybody's parents were here, somebody would deal with it—except that it sounded way too familiar.

Sure enough, Oliver burst out of the cluster of students, missing his fireman hat, tears streaming down his face. Keith immediately dropped into a crouch, and Oliver tried to climb into his arms. "What's going on, buddy?" he asked, and got in incomprehensible string of half-words, half-sobs in response.

Keith had been a dad long enough to be able to translate cry-speak, so he just petted Oliver's hair and ducked his head to whisper something soothing,

and equally nonsensical. "It's alright, you're okay. One of the big kids had a scary costume?"

He got a little nod of confirmation, and Oliver held out a shaky finger to point at... a kid who was probably about nine, wearing a clown mask with fake blood dripping down the front. It was starting to freak Keith out, too.

"Okay, let's, um..."

The teachers were getting the kids lined up to start the parade, and Keith didn't really have a way to wave Hunk over and explain the clown situation. And he couldn't take Oliver back to the group of kids without getting within clown-range again.

His solution came in the form of Lance wandering over to the two of them, holding Oliver's fireman hat in one hand. "Hey, guys. You alright?"

He would've preferred somebody who wasn't Lance, but this worked. "Uh, there was a clown situation," he said, and even at the word "clown," Oliver's hands turned into little fists in his jacket, pulling him closer.

Lance's eyebrows raised and he gave them a slow nod, like he agreed with the two of them that clowns were brightly-colored abominations from hell. "Gotcha. I'll go tell Hunk. You two wanna head to the art room? Nobody's in there, we can chill for a few until everybody heads back to their classrooms."

Okay, maybe Lance running into them was alright. "Yeah, sounds good," Keith said, "you wanna do that, bud?"

He got a quiet, "yeah," and so he scooped Oliver up into his arms, readjusting him so Keith could lean his cheek against Oliver's little, tearstained one. He wanted to keep petting his hair, but it took two hands to carry him now, and so he just turned and headed toward where he was pretty sure the art room was.

"Geez, you're getting heavy," he muttered, "I'm gonna have to start working out more."

The hallways were pretty quiet, with all the commotion happening in the gym, and Keith found the art room directly across the hall from a mural of the school mascot: a giant, roaring lion. It matched the one in the gym, and the one in the front of the school, and he realized, from the "L.C.M." signed at the bottom right, that Lance must've painted them.

Lance caught up with them as Keith was setting Oliver down just inside the door of the art room. He'd never been in Lance's classroom before, he'd only seen the unobtrusive plastic sign out front labeling it the art room, and the bright blue, much more decorative sign Lance had hung over the door.

"Hey! You didn't get lost!" Lance cheered, plopping Oliver's hat back on his head. A couple of his curls stuck out from under it.

"Yeah, we made it," Keith said.

"I told Hunk what was going on," Lance said, and Keith realized he was handing over Oliver's backpack. "The parade's the last thing they do for the day, so he said he'd go ahead and sign Oliver out for the afternoon."

"Oh. Thank you," Keith said, slinging the backpack over one arm.

"No big deal. You wanna hang out here for a bit until stuff dies down out there?"

"Yeah, that'd be great, thanks. I'm sure there's still, uh, scary guys out there," Keith said, looking around the room. It was huge, bigger than he'd thought it was from the outside, with three long picnic tables arranged in a U-shape in the middle, Lance's desk at the front with a markerboard behind it, full of drawings that looked like Lance's. The walls were covered with students' projects, some of them index-card sized, others wider than he was tall. A counter spanning the entire back wall of the room was full of different art supplies, along with carefully-labeled cabinets below it and a pair of sinks that were short enough for someone Oliver-sized to reach.

"We have a robot!" Oliver announced, running across the room to, wow, that was an actual robot. It was made of mostly cardboard-boxes, spray-painted silver, with different bits of recycled circuit-boards and other pieces

of technology glued on. There was a computer keyboard painted gold and set into its chest, and stripes of reflective tape covered its arms and legs. Its eyes looked almost like stoplights, but they weren't big enough to be.

"You wanna turn it on?" Lance asked him, and Oliver giggled and, in lieu of answering, pushed the switch on a power strip connected to the back of their creation. Their eyes flickered on, both bright blue, and a line of blue LEDs around the chest keyboard also lit up.

"Pretty impressive," Keith said, leaning against one of the counters and looking over the robot appraisingly. Lance mirrored his pose, one of his hands planted on the counter behind Keith's back. He was close enough that Keith could've easily wrapped a hand around his waist and pulled him against his side. He just folded his arms over his chest. He could remember what Lance's mouth tasted like.

"We haven't named him yet," Lance said, "or, well, her. Or them. It? No, that one sounds mean."

"He defends the universe!" Oliver proclaimed, throwing his hands in the air and sending his hat tumbling off his head again. Keith bent to scoop it back up, but Lance beat him to it, setting it safely on one of the tables.

Lance took a seat on the bench, facing the two of them, his elbows leaned on his knees. "Yeah, our robot friend flies out the window every night and protects the world from evil."

"Mr. McClain tells us stories about that kinda stuff after class," Oliver said, picking up one of the robot's hands and wiggling it around. Each hand was bigger than his head, and the whole robot would've been tall enough to brush the ceiling if it was standing. It moved pretty well, too; Keith could see a PVC frame underneath the cardboard when Oliver angled the hand so he could give it a high-five.

"Oh, so you're the one to blame for the robot obsession," Keith said, raising an eyebrow at Lance. "Pretty good robot, though."

"Dad makes robots!"

"I—no I don't, Oliver." But he was busy explaining the the classroom robot how Keith put things in a computer and created its bretheren. "I'm a programmer," he explained to Lance, "so, I guess I could run a robot? Depends."

"Aw, ruin my mad-robot-scientist Keith fantasy, why don't you," Lance said.

Keith stared at his crooked smile for a moment, then looked pointedly away. "I don't even want to know what goes through your head," he said. Lance stood, moving like he was going to come to Keith's side again. He glanced at the time on his phone, hoping it had been long enough. Eleven-thirty. "I think we should be good to go. C'mon, kiddo, let's head home."

He made sure not to look Lance in the eyes on the way out, just muttered his quiet thanks.

Oliver picked up his hat and followed Keith for the door, hopping on out and only pausing briefly when Lance laid a hand on Keith's shoulder to stop him. "Hey, Keith. I wanted to, uh. Can we talk, sometime?"

"I don't..." Keith watched Oliver run around the hallway, pretending to chase down wildfires and punch them. He didn't seem to know what firefighters did. "Lance, I don't think that's a good idea."

"*Why?*" Lance asked, wearing the only frown Keith could remember seeing on his face. "I know you felt... something."

"It's just not a good time for me to be with somebody," Keith said, stepping away so that Lance's hand fell from his shoulder. He couldn't let Lance touch him anymore, because he'd start getting too-detailed flashbacks of the way it felt to have Lance pressed against him.

"Keith—"

"I can't do this right now, okay? I can't. I'm sorry."

He found it distressingly easy to avoid Lance after that. Probably because Lance was avoiding him, too.

November

Every year, Colleen and Sam held Thanksgiving dinner at their house, and it was always the same people, the same food, the same obnoxious, turkey-themed tablecloth that Sam thought was the best purchase he'd ever made. It was nice to walk through the door and be hit by the scent of dinner cooking and Colleen's favorite holiday-themed candle, the heat of the fireplace a welcome warmth after running from the car into the house. He just barely managed to get Oliver out of his coat and boots before he tore off to play with the dog, and he relaxed into the same armchair he hung out in every year.

The familiarity was nice, after the past couple months had turned into anything *but* routine, thanks to play-dates with all Oliver's new friends, way more events than one elementary school should hold, and, of course, Lance.

Keith hadn't seen much of him since Halloween. Lance was there every third day for end-of-school pick-up monitor duty, and he'd taken to giving Keith the same pleasant greeting he gave to all the parents, but nothing more. He hadn't asked him to talk again. Keith pretended like he didn't know why that bothered him, but it was getting harder and harder to lie to himself.

"What's up with you?" Colleen asked him, as he helped clear the table and somehow fit everything into the dishwasher. "You look grumpy."

"I always look grumpy, it's just my face," Keith said, a well-worn answer.

"Mm-hm. Keith, I've only been your mom half your life, but I know when you're lying to me." She handed him another serving dish, and he had to rearrange a bunch of plates to fit it.

"Okay, fine, I'm grumpy."

"And why's that?" she asked, getting started on washing out the roasting pan that was never gonna fit, while Keith boxed up leftovers for people to take home later.

"I just... there's this guy," he started, and she nodded sagely, like she'd heard this before. Probably from a sixteen-year-old Matt. "I think I had a chance with him, but I messed everything up."

All she said was, "hmm," and it wasn't a question, but it prompted him to keep going, anyhow. He wasn't sure how she managed to do that. Must've been a special mom ability.

"I don't think I know how to do the relationship thing and the dad thing at the same time," Keith admitted. "So I've spent, what, the last five years turning guys down because I've never met anybody who was, well, who was good enough to potentially be his dad."

She set the pan upside-down to dry and turned to face him, leaning against the counter, drying her hands off on a dishtowel. "I'll be honest with you, Keith, I'd have no idea how to do that, either. But it sounds like you've found somebody you think is good enough."

"Yeah, I have. And I told him I wasn't ready to date somebody, and now he just... I think he gave up on us being a thing." He sighed, and passed a hand over his face. He hadn't expected to feel this tired so early on in the day. "I just... I missed my chance."

"You know, there's this really great thing called talking to somebody," she said, with less sarcasm than he was expecting.

"Right, but I'm Keith."

"And you're talking to me right now." She sighed, and looked toward the living room, where everybody was around the coffee table, playing some kind of board game. "You and Matt are both like this, you know. You just avoid people by not talking to them and he avoids people by talking their ear off about nothing. At least Pidge tells it like it is."

"Pidge got it from you guys," Keith said, "we missed that somehow."

"Pidge got it from *me*," she corrected him, "Matt's basically the same person as his father."

"So, your advice is 'go talk to him'?" Keith confirmed.

"Yes, it is. As soon as possible," Colleen said, smacking him on the arm with a dishtowel. "You don't wait on this kind of thing, Keith."

Keith decided then that pep talks from your mom were the ultimate form of motivation. He was ready to run out of the house and go... go do *something* dramatic, until he remembered that, one: he didn't have Lance's phone number, two: he was pretty sure Lance was visiting his family for Thanksgiving, like a normal person, and, three: any dramatic confessions of romantic feelings on a holiday put him dangerously close to the "I am living a Hallmark movie" zone.

Instead, he let himself get roped into another board game with Pidge, and started mentally rehearsing what he was gonna say to Lance next time he saw him.

December

Keith didn't get to talk to Lance for a while, because apparently all of Lance's free time between Thanksgiving and Christmas got eaten up by set design for the school's holiday musical... production, and so he was never one of the teachers on duty making sure all the kindergarteners found their parents after class. Keith found this out from Hunk when he finally dragged up the courage to ask how Lance had been after two straight weeks of not seeing him around. Hunk gave him an upsettingly knowing look along with the information.

Keith also had no idea what kind of conversation he was supposed to have with Lance while he was trying to get Oliver out of the school and into the car among several other parents doing the exact same thing.

So, the first time Keith saw Lance after determining that he was *going* to ask him out was at the holiday... paegent? Keith had no idea what this thing was actually called, but it seemed like it was an amalgamation of every winter holiday that still leaned heavily toward Christmas-themed. Colleen and Sam wanted to come with him, but had accepted an invite to another Christmas party the same night, so Keith had been tasked with taking as many pictures as humanly possible of Oliver in a little Santa hat, singing Jingle Bells off-key with the rest of the kindergarteners.

Okay, it was pretty cute. Keith wasn't that much of a grinch.

The kindergarteners went first, because they only had so much energy to focus toward singing, and some of them already seemed too bored with it to care by the time their number was over. Oliver spent the rest of the musical sitting on Keith's lap and getting annoyed looks from the other parents for making too-loud comments on everything. Keith thought it was kind of funny, and he answered Oliver's questions only a few decibels lower.

He didn't run into Lance until the end, while all the kids were occupied with the Christmas cookies they had brought out. Lance was trying to gracefully back out of a conversation with one of the PTA moms and failing, steadily taking steps backward until he was quite literally backed against the wall. Well, backed against the stage. Keith decided to rescue him. He may have also had some alternative motives.

"Lance, hey, can I steal you for a second?" he asked, putting a hand on Lance's shoulder and hoping that Lance couldn't feel his hand shaking through his cable-knit sweater.

"Yeah, no problem," said Lance, who looked very grateful to be stolen for a second. "Thanks, man," he added once they were out of earshot, "I swear to god, she was going to talk my ear right off."

"No problem," Keith said, snatching his hand back from Lance's shoulder when he realized it was still resting there. Okay. This was the part where he decided whether he was gonna brush things off as just being a good friend and rescuing Lance from an uncomfortable conversation, or...

Lance smiled at him and the angles of his face were caught just right by the strings of fairy lights hanging on the stage curtains.

Yeah, he was going for it.

"I actually did want to talk to you," Keith said, and then he took a breath to steady himself. When that didn't work, he looked to the side and blew it out, hoping nobody was watching him make a fool of himself. Seriously, he was pretty sure some of the kindergarteners were better at admitting to romantic feelings than he was.

"What's up?" Lance asked, and he was having *just* enough trouble with casual for Keith to grab his courage back from wherever it was trying to escape to.

"Okay, so you know how I said I wasn't... ready, or whatever?" he asked, and Lance nodded, slow. "Yeah. Well, I think I was just... scared. Or something. And now, uh... I was thinking, maybe..."

"D'you wanna go on a date sometime?" Lance asked, like he was trying to get the words out before Keith did something stupid and backtracked on himself.

"Yes," Keith said, maybe a little too emphatic.

Lance sighed, and buried his face behind one hand for a second. "Oh, thank god. I was so freaked out, I thought I ruined everything after that one time —never mind. Lemme give you my number."

Keith was really getting rusty at this whole thing if it had taken him five months just to get a guy's phone number.

— — —

Keith sat at a high table in the corner of the coffeeshop nearest the fireplace. He'd never been there before. It was a cozy little place, with exposed brick walls and a series of mismatched vintage coffee mugs on the mantle. Keith didn't have much mental energy to spare for the decor, though, because he

was busy glancing up every time the bell over the door chimed and another patron walked in heralded by a flurry of snow, then sighing when it was somebody he didn't recognize. He was up to four times, and was starting to think he was losing his mind.

Lance wasn't late, not even close. Keith was just a full twenty minutes early, which meant he had twenty minutes of nothing to do but work himself into an anxious frenzy over a first date.

The bell rang again, and Keith forced himself to keep looking right down at his phone. He wasn't going to stare at some random stranger like a creep, not this time. Nope.

About ten seconds later, Lance rapped his knuckles on the surface of the table and startled Keith out of his internal attempt to keep himself from spiraling. He was smiling warmly, and tugging a beanie off of his unruly hair, unwinding a scarf that looked hand-made from around his neck.

"Hey, handsome. Been here long?"

Keith suddenly remembered that he could not handle the full force of Lance's flirting. He went red and stammered something unintelligible that ended in, "hey." Lance just kept smiling, stepping forward and pulling Keith into a hug that was a little awkward because Keith was still seated. "Good to see you," Keith mumbled into the fabric of his coat, and Lance ran his palm down the span of Keith's back. Lance hugged him a few seconds too long for a casual greeting, and it made his insides feel carbonated, he was so happy.

"You found the place okay?" Lance asked, because the coffeeshop had been his suggestion. Apparently he was a regular, that much made obvious when he slung his jacket over the back of the chair and walked up to the counter with a hand tucked into Keith's elbow, waving at somebody who was fiddling with an espresso machine.

"Yeah, yeah. It's cute," Keith said, squinting at the menu. It had way too many items on it, and a large percentage of them were written in Italian.

Lance greeted all three of the people behind the counter by name, and Keith was almost surprised when nobody said the words "the usual." It was just, "hey, Lance, how's it going?"

Lance, being Lance, responded with, "it's great, dude, have you seen my date? It's going *awesome*." At that point, Keith buried his face in his scarf, but the girl taking their order just chuckled like she was used to Lance saying weird shit, and asked for their order. "Peppermint hot chocolate with extra marshmallows," Lance said, and the sugar bomb in a mug seemed about on brand for him.

"I, uh. I usually just drink black coffee," Keith said. He hadn't been to a Starbucks in years. He usually got coffee in industrial-sized tins from Costco.

"I'll get you a dark roast," she determined, and he trusted her judgment as a coffee professional. Or, you know, as a person who had tried a different kind of coffee in the last decade.

Keith trusted her judgment even more a few minutes later, because the coffee was amazing. Lance seemed pretty happy with his hot chocolate, too, especially charmed by the candy cane sticking out of the mug. He sat across from Keith, with his ankles hooked around Keith's, and he was describing his latest family dinner, or, more specifically, the part where his youngest sister had spent most of it throwing food at people around the table to see whether they could catch it in their mouths. He still spoke with his hands, even when they were settled on his mug to keep them warm, his long fingers knocking against the handle every so often.

"How old is your sister?" Keith asked, because he didn't know Lance had younger siblings, too.

"Oh, she's thirty-three."

"Oh. I was kind of imagining a sixteen-year-old. I guess Pidge would do the same thing, though."

"Having met Pidge, I agree." Lance popped the candy cane in his mouth and he either had no idea what watching him suck on it was doing to Keith, or he knew way too well.

They stuck around the coffeeshop long after they finished their drinks, and Keith managed to keep himself from checking for texts from Matt and Shiro for most of the evening. They were good at the babysitting thing by now, he reminded himself, and if they really needed to get ahold of him, they'd call.

Avoiding his phone was made easier because once they didn't have a pair of mugs between them, Lance reached across the little table and took Keith's hands in his, like that was a completely normal thing for them. His hands were warm, and Keith liked that, too.

Lance carried a conversation easily, which Keith was thankful for, because he'd never been able to, and when Keith answered with something sarcastic, Lance just smiled and did his best to sass him back. He was pretty good at it, too.

"Are you doing alright?" Lance asked, after Keith had been quiet for a while.

"I'm fine," he said, "I'm just nervous. I think that's standard protocol for a first date."

"You don't have to be, though," Lance said, squeezing his hands, "because the things you worry about on a first date are whether they like you," he raised a finger to tick that off his mental list, "which, of course I do. And then you worry about the first kiss, which..."

"Yeah, we're pretty good at that part already," Keith said.

Lance winked at him, which was ridiculous.

They only stayed a little over an hour and a half, because Keith had told Matt and Shiro he would be back to pick Oliver up by ten. Lance let Keith

"walk him to his car," which just meant he spent a long moment with Lance leaning against his shitty Corolla and kissing him.

It was freezing, but Lance's mouth was hot, and it was better than anything Keith could've imagined back in July when he was trying his damndest not to imagine anything at all. Lance put his gloved hands on the side of Keith's head, over his ears, because Keith wasn't wearing a hat and was going to get cold.

Someone beeped their car horn at them. Lance didn't stop kissing him. He didn't stop until the tips of their noses were freezing.

Then, he leaned back, and with an especially brilliant smile, asked, "so, do I get a second date?"

"You can have all the dates you want," Keith said. It didn't make sense, but neither did most of the things he said to Lance.

"Alright," he said, "You wanna have the next one at my place, babe?" Keith was very surprised there was not a wink after that one, too.

Lance left a kiss mark cooling on his cheek, and Keith sat in his car in the parking lot, watching Lance's headlights disappearing in the distance and wondering how he even got here. He thought maybe he should send Matt and Pidge a thank-you card. Or maybe just tell them they were required to babysit for him when he went out with Lance, because it was, after all, their fault that Keith ended up with a boyfriend.

Author's Note:

Come say hi to me on tumblr @luddlestons!